Center for Strategic and International Studies

Project on Nuclear Issues

TRANSCRIPT

The Negotiator Files: A Conversation with Ron Lehman

FEATURING

Ron Lehman

INTERVIEWED BY

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DATE

September 4, 2025

Amy Nelson:

Well, we're delighted to be with Ambassador Ron Lehman today. He was, of course, the Chief START I Negotiator from 1985 [1986] to 1988, and the director of ACDA from 1989 to 1993. He was a former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy. And he's currently affiliated with Lawrence Livermore National Lab. He is actively engaged today in nuclear security and arms control policy development.

Welcome, Ron.

Ron Lehman:

I'm pleased to be here.

Amy Nelson:

Could you start by sharing a bit about your background? What brought you to this field? How did your academic and professional background then shape your approach to all these arms control negotiations you oversaw and were intimately involved with?

Ron Lehman:

Well, that's an interesting story. I was born in 1946, so I was born into the nuclear age. But if you do the calculation, I was conceived before Trinity, before the first nuclear weapons test. So the whole existence of the nuclear age and the Cold War was the reality that I had grown up in and had to learn to deal with. I had an academic background. I served with the Army in Vietnam. When I came back and went back to grad school and took a postdoc at the Hoover Institution, people were always asking me about deterrence theory, defense policy, and arms control. And they're all interrelated, so I studied all of them. I got a postdoc to Washington D.C. and ended up working on the Senate Armed Services Committee. And then, moving over to the Defense Department and the National Security Council before the things that you mentioned.

So in some cases, I found myself working with the technology. And other cases, with the procurements and manufacturing. And other cases, the policy. But primarily, I ended up focusing on policy. And this was, of course, the golden age of arms control, both from a confrontational point of view, but also ultimately a cooperative point of view. And so, everybody was doing more arms control than they ever imagined they would be doing in their lives. I used to complain when I was in the Defense Department that I was spending too much of my time on arms control. And when I had to run a large independent agency devoted to arms control, I complained that I didn't have enough time to spend on arms control. But I would say the thing that most influenced me was, with an academic background, I approached things analytically.

So on the one hand, when you're a player, you have to play your role. You have your instructions. People like to think that the negotiator does everything. In fact, negotiator is just one cog in a whole bunch of gears that make things work. But the particular skill that I think is valuable, and my bottom line is, every now and then you have to step back and take a fresh look at things analytically. And I think that was the skill that helped me most. When I was the START negotiator, there was an intern, a young lady whose internship required that she interview people about the senior person in their organization, right up their background and analyze their leadership.

And then, go to that person and get a critique of their paper, which I thought was a kind of a strange assignment, but she showed up. And the paper began with something glorious about me like, "Ambassador Lehman's career has advanced with leaps and bounds from one grand

challenge to another and always succeeding." Well, I said, "Well, obviously you're not aware of my mistakes and failures. But you have it fundamentally wrong, that in some ways I am one of the best examples of incrementalism you could have because everything I have done was related to the next thing I would do. It was just slightly different." So I was constantly being prepared. So I knew the players, I knew the subjects. So one of the reasons I didn't make too many big mistakes was that in fact I had really had a lot of experience doing what I was doing.

Amy Nelson:

Was it a unique moment, do you think, in time or relative to today where there were more opportunities to develop this knowledge base and skill set that informed your incrementalism, but ultimately fairly comprehensive approach to arms control?

Ron Lehman:

I think it was, but with an academic background and an interest in history, there are antecedents to everything. There are enduring principles as well as changes. I often joke that we have a steep learning curve, but we also have a steep forgetting curve. That's one reason why I like your project, because at least we can start trying to learn about the future and remember the things of the past that still may be applicable.

Amy Nelson:

Terrific. Thank you. What common skills or frameworks or even institutional strengths do you think contributed to U.S. success for both START and CFE negotiations? We'll get into each of the negotiations in particular, but are there any best practices you'd like to highlight at the outset?

Ron Lehman:

Well, there are many best practices. But I think the important thing is that you have to be dynamic because it's a competition as well as cooperation. And both sides have objectives. You have to understand, not only what they say their objectives are and what you say your objectives are, but what actually are your objectives as I implied earlier. And an important thing is to be able to step back and say, what really should be your objectives?

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Ron Lehman:

Which may require you to make some adjustments. So I think one of the great strengths of the Western democracies is often described as their weakness, which is that they have diverse views. But as long as you have a process to have a marketplace of ideas, to have tolerant discussion of differences, to work out, to find the common ground, I think you can be successful. One of the problems in the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that we were dealing with was that, typically, they had a powerful person at the top, or a nomenklatura, a ruling class that was very rigid and not very agile. Now, at some times, their ability to make quick decisions gave them an advantage.

But I think in the long run, our ability to make better decisions gave us the advantage. And that's not only in the details, the negotiation, but also in the broader context. So for example, after Sputnik and the contrast between our failed attempts to put satellites in space and Soviet successes and dramatic events in space, there was a strong view around much of the world, particularly in the developing world, that command economies of the East were superior to

market economies of the West. And yet, one of the main reasons the Cold War came to an end and we were successful in our arms control negotiations was the recognition finally in the Soviet Union that they were well into what they call the age of stagnation. It wasn't working, and they needed to find other ways. So timing is important.

So I guess what I'm saying is you need to think analytically. What do you really want to accomplish? You have to have some flexibility because of the complexity of the dynamics. And you have to be somewhat creative, but you also have to recognize that timing is a consideration. There are windows of opportunity and there are times when it doesn't work so well. One point I would make is that there tends to be an assumption, which is mostly correct, that negotiations is about trade-offs. Trading off something I value for something they value, and not as often the case. But there is another aspect to it that is also important, which sometimes seems a little bit idealistic, but I think of it more in a realistic term, which is finding the common ground.

Let me give you an example, not from the nuclear, although it was important to our nuclear success, and that's the Helsinki Process and the Stockholm Agreement on confidence and security building measures. In 1980, when the next step in the Helsinki Process was to go to Stockholm and negotiate whether or not you could have more information about military exercises or perhaps even have observers, there was a real concern in the State Department that this might be too dangerous. Why? Well, we were deploying the INF missiles in response to the Soviet SS-20s. So the NATO allies were under tremendous domestic political pressure. Their parties were fighting each other, there were protests in the streets, and NATO looked very divided.

Helsinki included the neutral and non-aligned. And the view in the US was that they weren't always so neutral and they weren't always so non-aligned. They were always supporting idealistic generalities that the East would always say they were in favor of, and we kept putting footnotes on. And then, there was the view that the East, the third bloc, would be absolutely rock solid. And that this was going to be a very dangerous negotiation. That turned out to be fundamentally wrong on all counts. Why? Well, first of all, precisely because we were deploying the INF missiles, and NATO got its act together. NATO was never so united and effective at working together and looking out for each other as we were when we were deploying the INF missiles.

The neutral, non-aligned was a very interesting case. The Soviets and the Warsaw Pact, for the most part, had large standing armies. The Western democracies relied on the mobilization of reserves. So the Soviets proposed, the Eastern Bloc, I should say, proposed as a "stabilizing measure" that there should be constraints on mobilization. Well, guess what? We didn't have to worry about that issue. Why? Because the neutral and non-aligned, which in those days was Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the Yugoslavs, they relied on mobilization. They weren't about to give up on that. We didn't have to take the lead on that. We had a powerful ally in the neutral and non-aligned. And in the East, we expected that they would be rock solid.

But remember, this was the period of Zapad-81, of the Solidarity Labor Movement in Poland ferment in the East. You may remember that we challenged the Soviets that they did not notify Zapad-81 as required under the Helsinki agreements. And they said, "No, it didn't apply because it wasn't one big exercise. It was a lot of little exercises." Well, but they were all little exercises all around Poland. There was no doubt what they were about. They were trying to tell the Poles, "You better do something about these people." But what was the impact on the rest of the Eastern Bloc, including the Poles? The answer was, "You know, having Western observers at Soviet military exercises might not be such a bad idea."

Amy Nelson:

That's right. So the splintering of the pact.

Ron Lehman:

The splintering of the pact. And so, you see how if you analyze things, you play the dynamics, but keep your principles, you can do very well, but it still takes the right circumstances.

Amy Nelson:

Absolutely. That's terrific. Thank you. I want to talk specifically about the START I Treaty and its negotiation.

Ron Lehman:

All right.

Amy Nelson:

The treaty of course was signed in 1991, and entered into force a few years later, and it reduced strategic offensive arms. It was the first treaty to mandate actual reductions to deploy nuclear arsenals. And you were the chief U.S. negotiator. Talk about coming to the arms control negotiation table. What was the impetus for that and what drove both sides to the table?

Ron Lehman:

Well, you can start with what were the big drivers? For the United States, what we were looking for were a variety of things, but fundamentally a stable nuclear balance that did not undermine the conventional balance and our allies overseas and our positions. So we were focused very much on things like fast-flying ballistic missiles. And there was a geopolitical aspect, which was fundamentally NATO. Although as I can discuss Far East Asia, East Asia too, there was sort of some crisis stability issues, the fast flyers, slow flyer distinctions, vulnerability, survivability issues. There was a lot of that technical. There was also a domestic political. There were domestic political factors that grew out of the negotiation of SALT I, which did go into effect. It was an interim agreement, the offensive and included the ABM Treaty, but also SALT II, which never entered into force largely because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but not only that.

But there were a lot of issues. So for example, SALT I had basically been a freeze. It had unequal levels where the critique was that the Soviets were able to pocket their momentum, and then stop ours. And so, there was division over whether or not you should do a freeze. And so when the nuclear freeze movement tried to block the INF missile deployments, there was already in place a debate that said, "No, we have to have equal ceilings. It should be equal." SALT I and SALT II, because of MIRV. I mean, the arms control verification was very limited. It was primarily enabled by what we call national technical means of verification, spy satellites, and things like that. So what were you counting? Well, if you look at SALT I, we were counting holes in the ground, tubes in submarines. We were counting submarines. And in the ABM Treaty, we were counting bases. There was a feeling that you needed a much more realistic measure. This resulted in some very esoteric debates like throw weight and size of missiles and what they could carry.

It also led to what is the holy grail of nuclear arms control, which is what's a warhead? On how do you limit them? But in SALT I, it was clear that you were permitting because of MIRV, a huge build-up in warheads, and SALT II as well. So you went from thousands to tens of thousands all in the legitimate terms of a arms control agreement. So there was a lot of criticism that the SALT I and SALT II weren't real arms control agreements because they, not only didn't stop the buildup of warheads, they actually permitted a huge buildup of warheads, and they didn't reduce in the environment, which was highly politicized overseas and at home, tremendous political divisions, lots of wild public rhetoric on all sides. You started getting into I used to call arms control chicken. Everybody wanted to propose a more grandiose proposal than the previous

proposal, but primarily not for the negotiations, although they had an impact, but primarily to deal with domestic and foreign public relations.

Amy Nelson:

More expansive reductions.

Ron Lehman:

More expansive reductions. So the formation of the START I policy was equal ceilings. It had to provide for reductions and it had to be stabilizing. And by stabilizing what was meant was the greatest constraints should be on the fast-flying ballistic missiles, and in particular the heavy missiles that could carry very large numbers of large warheads. That, of course, raised the issue of asymmetries because we didn't have any of the, really, you can call them superheavies. Only the Soviets did. And so people said, "Well, that's unfair to ask them to give those up when you don't even have them." So you see, you get into a lot of dynamics.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

But what the US was really trying to do was say, "The way to deal with this buildup is to emphasize stability, emphasize reductions, and emphasize equality." And those were kind of the negotiating principles. But how they played out in detail is really very interesting. Let me give you a number of examples of how things evolve, say, from SALT I to New START. And then, later if you want to talk about verification. Verification was a critical factor.

Amy Nelson:

Would love to get to that.

Ron Lehman:

In everything?

Amy Nelson:

This way, you're defining this kind of U.S. approach to stability, right? Where there's parity, there's equal numbers, right? There's a cap. Did you have to convince the Soviets that this was the right direction to move in? Did they find the previous configuration more stabilizing, for example?

Ron Lehman:

Well, they vastly preferred the SALT I approach, because it codified their numerical superiority. It gave them unique capabilities that we didn't have, and in some cases, prevented us from getting them. You can debate this, but by and large, I think it's the case that they could see the emergence of the microelectronics revolution. And the West seemed to be doing so much better than they were, and I think that's because we're an open society. And you know, we're here in Silicon Valley.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah. Scientific freedom.

Ron Lehman:

It's a wild and crazy place. You don't have that in Moscow. You have great mathematicians, you have great central leadership, but the idea of a whole bunch of new startups is not their style, and we were just starting to dominate. And I think they saw that in a lot of areas, and missile defense was one of them. If that were to be exploited, it could begin to negate some of the things that they thought gave them a lot of leverage.

If you look at strategic offensive arms, there are some big principle issues, and then there are the kind of the details. And how they played out is interesting. And verification was ultimately an important part of that. But let me begin with the basics. Most people don't understand this issue, which is we and the Soviets and the Russians today have never, ever agreed on what is a strategic nuclear weapon. And yet, we've had treaties.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

How can that be? Well, let me explain. Our definition of strategic was kind of technically focused. We are particularly interested in the fast-flying ballistic missiles. So ICBMs and SLBMs were obvious, and that's what SALT I dealt with. SALT I did not deal with bombers or their weapons at all, zero. And the Soviet definition of strategic, though, is very different. It is those weapons whose purpose is to attack the homeland from wherever they are based. Well, what did that mean? Well, that meant that our forward-based systems, including tactical and theater systems counted, but their comparable systems aimed at our allies, and our forces overseas didn't count.

Amy Nelson:

Because they couldn't reach our homeland.

Ron Lehman:

Yep. And there's more to that. But let me give you one anecdote that I think you might find useful. In '85, after we began to renew the talks, Gorbachev had come to power. We had successfully deployed the INF missiles. It was now a more optimal time to start engaging. Ronald Reagan had kind of captured the high ground by calling for reductions, including as deep as 50%, by some definition. And so, Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, was coming to Washington. And he did a kind of public tour around the world, dropping hints that they were going to agree to 50%. He got great press. He comes to Washington. It's wonderful. I later met with Shevardnadze when he was president of an independent Georgia.

And he recalled how much he enjoyed this period, and he even remembered me, which at least he said he did. We had certainly met a number of times. But on his trip in '85, he got rave reviews in all the newspapers of record over the fact that they were now agreeing to a 50% reduction. We go back to Geneva, and we find out what the 50% reduction really means. It's their definition of strategic. So it's an equal ceiling. That's positive. But within that equal ceiling, all of our forward-based systems count and the British and French count against our number. So although the ceiling is going to be approximately several thousand, they're going to get several thousand more that we don't get.

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Ron Lehman:

In strategic. In other words, ICBMs and SLBMs, because we have to choose between ourselves and our allies and our forces overseas. That is a fundamental issue. And we should spend a little time on INF because INF was really right up there with START I, probably even more impactful immediately. But INF was all about this question of, was the West going to stay united on the periphery of the Soviet Union?

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

So that's the kind of big strategic question. But now, let me give you a specific issue. Bombers and the slow flyers and their weapons. They weren't included in SALT I. They were included in SALT II in two ways. One, there was a limit on delivery vehicles, missiles and bombers. And so, bombers counted under that as a bomber. There was also a kind of a subceiling on MIRV missiles and ALCM carrying bombers. When we got into START I, we wanted to protect the diversity of the Triad because we viewed that as highly stabilizing.

We found that for a lot of different escalation scenarios, particularly deterring at the lower levels of escalation, which is where the things begin. One of the big problems in arms control is everybody wants to talk about Armageddon and how do you prevent Armageddon? Well, the answer is Armageddon just doesn't happen. It starts somewhere, and people neglect where it starts, that's why CFE matters, that's why OSCE matters, that's why Stockholm matters, that's why the Treaty of Paris matters. That's why verification, transparency, accountability are incredibly important because it's down at the lower levels where it all begins.

Amy Nelson:

It reduces the risk of conflict breaking out.

Ron Lehman:

And that's where much of the arms control community just is absent. They don't even understand.

Amy Nelson:

Can you unpack that a bit for our viewers? Why are these transparency mechanisms, these conflict prevention mechanisms, what do they do specifically and what makes them so important?

Ron Lehman:

Well, I mean, they're important to how each side thinks and how each side behaves. One of the problems that we have today is that everybody wants to declare norms, but it's really about behavior.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

And so, well, how do you influence behavior? Well, the answer is you communicate information. So if the other side thinks you're a threat, then you want to show them what the real situation is, and you may want them to understand that you have capabilities. On the other hand, you may

want them to understand that you're not intending to use them unless they do something that's very bad. So communications is important, but how do you validate that?

Well, we have a long history of verification we can go into later of how we went from no verification and just trust to national technical means, to national technical means that are really designed for arms control rather than intelligence, to data exchanges, to inspections of data, validating data, to what I call embedded engagement, where you're actually working with the security people on the other side on concrete issues. This may be a bit of a diversion, but let me give you an example.

The Threshold Test Ban Treaty was negotiated in '72, but it had never been ratified because of concerns over verification. We proposed to the Soviets when they started to be more open and be willing, and Gorbachev said that, "We are open to inspections and things." We proposed a joint verification experiment in which we would actually let them see a direct measurement of a test, and propose that we allow direct measurement, or at minimum, local seismic stations to monitor declared tests in conjunction with the 150 kt limit of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty.

That was an amazing accomplishment. People talk about Track 2 and Track 3 and Track 1. I call this Track 1/2 because you really had the technical security experts of both sides working together on the most sensitive things. It was amazing. That led to a negotiation in which I and Secretary Baker had received letters from Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina who had been very skeptical about arms control saying when we went to Jackson Hole in Wyoming to meet with the Soviets that, you know, "Don't sell out the country." I'm paraphrasing.

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Ron Lehman:

Obviously. And you need to get the following things. Well, somebody had been talking to him about what was going on in the interagency and what people thought was and wasn't necessary. When I got the letter, I went to Fred Eimer. Dr. Eimer was the verification head at ACDA and a verification guru. And I said, "Fred, give me some negotiating wampum. I want the ACDA position to be very demanding." Well, what happened at Jackson Hole is that we had enough trading material that we got everything that Jesse Helms said we had to get. The result was the Threshold Test Ban Treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate 98 to nothing. When's the last time an arms control agreement got negotiated and ratified 98 to nothing?

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

In the Senate. That's a different world. But the key to it was achieving objectives that people said they wanted, and it worked out well. It was also the model for what would later become Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction, embedded engagement, science engagement. And for a number of years, this openness and transparency gave great confidence. And so, we went from a period in which they were suspicious that we would get national security secrets. So they didn't want to have any verification and they wanted to rely on declaratory measures, No First Use, and stuff like that. And then, they got into a regime in which they saw the benefits of cooperating with some transparency. And then, they got this tremendous openness where they said, "We don't want to be separate from the West. We want to be open with the West."

And unfortunately, it was a short period of time. Now, one of the consequences of verification emphasis, and arms control, and openness was that it impacted these societies. And I think the totalitarian regimes, the dictatorships had a lot of problem with the openness. There was a lot of pushback from the security services. And needless to say, we could talk, but I won't go there about what has happened since. But with the Soviet Union changing from a bureaucratic nomenklatura to a kleptocratic nomenklatura and a mafia-like structure with the security services being a key part of this corruption and oppression. The thing they feared most were the colored revolutions, which is their own people. And they blame that on this kind of openness and transparency with the West.

Amy Nelson:

Sure.

Ron Lehman:

And so, one of the problems we're going to face in the future of arms control is that they don't want openness because they think that it will undermine their regimes, political survivability. And it's worse than that because what you've now seen is the deliberate vandalization of norms in order to intimidate the West.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

And so you say, "Well, why don't we agree on X and we'll worry about verification later." Yeah, but X is going to be vaporware.

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Ron Lehman:

Especially when you're dealing with people who like to violate things in order to get your attention and to intimidate you. So that's an issue.

Amy Nelson:

Speaking of the significance of transparency, access to information, the stabilizing this effect, not just on the relationship, but the security environment, and of course growing Russian resistance to these ideas. How should we think about this now that the United States is actually leaning into greater ambiguity in its nuclear posture, its nuclear intentions? What's at stake here? What are the risks of this approach?

Ron Lehman:

Well, I'm not sure what you mean by greater ambiguity. There is always some ambiguity. On the other hand, too much ambiguity and you're in trouble. Too little ambiguity, and you're in trouble. You got to get the ambiguity right, and that changes. But I think the biggest danger in arms control is fatigue. People just get tired. And so, why can't we just have peace? Why don't we just declare peace? Let's get together, and we'll have a discussion. The great men of history, we'll get

together, we'll have peace. That doesn't last very long. What are the structural foundations? They aren't all arms control. Arms control is just one tool of a wide range of things.

I've often said that everything's related to everything, but some things are more related to other. But you can't talk about arms control and disarmament without talking about the other Ds like defense and deterrence, but also diplomacy, democracy, development. I've got a whole list of the various D words, all of which are interrelated. You've got to create the conditions. In the long run, it really is about changing the way people think and act. And these are just tools to influence that. I might say a word about the relationship between deterrence and disarmament or arms control because I think a lot of people see them as antithetical, and I don't think they understand that, no, they're really about the same thing.

They go back in history to Sun Tzu and before. But really, deterrence and arms control as disciplines kind of emerged out of the industrial age because of the rise of incredibly destructive weapons. And of course, they reached their zenith in the nuclear age where the nuclear exchange is the symbol of deterrence. And the grand treaty is the symbol of arms control and disarmament. But they all basically work the same way. What they do is they basically emphasize fear of risk in order to encourage restraint. And so, what is the ultimate measure of merit for arms control? Well, to some degree, it's how well does it help deterrence. And look at it the other way. How do you have arms control if you can't deter noncompliance?

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Ron Lehman:

They work together.

Amy Nelson:

Why do you think that message is so lost or muddled today?

Ron Lehman:

I think it's in politics, the simplicity of the message is important. Ban the bomb, peace through strength. You know, you need a bumper sticker.

Amy Nelson:

That's right.

Ron Lehman:

And it's us, them. And that really drives a lot of oversimplification. The real world is more complex. Now on the one hand, you can't communicate, you can't lead, you can't even think or write without some simplification. So oversimplification is bad. But on the other hand, if you make it too complex, you can't do anything. So it's really about finding that balance. But as I think people understand, the problem with finding balance is it's boring. It's much more exciting to be at the extreme.

Amy Nelson:

Yep.

Ron Lehman:

And to say, "I'm for this or I'm for that." But the key to success is kind of bringing it all together in the right balance, and that's not always easy.

Amy Nelson:

This idea that we're missing nuance today that it's very difficult for folks to engage with more complex or interrelated issues. Is that what you're saying?

Ron Lehman:

Absolutely. But going back to START I, let me show how something that's very big can become seemingly very technical, but that you then can use innovation to figure out how to solve the problem. And then, maybe talk a little bit about the future. One of the issues of SALT I was that bomber weapons weren't included. We weren't too worried about that because we had superiority in bombers, and so they were excluded. And indeed the argument was made. Well, the numerical advantages within the treaty were compensated by our advantages outside the treaty. Nevertheless, when the idea was, but shouldn't you be capturing all of it and shouldn't be more equal? Yet you had to find a way. I mentioned what was done in SALT II. So we come along, and what we did in START I was take something that was conceptually in SALT II, which was nested sublimits.

So you couldn't have any more than X of these, of which no more than X could be that. And so, typically the way that emerged was what we wanted to capture was the fast-flyers, ballistic missiles. And then, we wanted to capture in particular the ICBMs and in particular the heavy ICBMs. We also had concerns because of verification about mobile ICBMs. So there were sort of a hierarchy of limits. And then, a total limit that would include things like bomber weapons. The dynamics of the negotiations resulted in, we finally got the Soviets to agree to basically the idea of sublimits on heavy ICBMs and on ICBMs, because to some degree we could say, "Well, you'd already sort of agreed to that not as a warhead number, but as delivery vehicles in SALT I, so you should be familiar with this."

They kind of accepted that. But there were two issues that were still hung up, and they involved making room for bombers. So we had agreed on a ceiling overall on weapons. And the question was, how would we count weapons on bombers? And the Soviets wanted to count every weapon. And the problem with that was, that given the nature of the ceilings, if you had to choose between treating a bomber weapon equally with a ballistic missile weapon, there was a powerful pressure not to have the bomber weapon because they had low alert rates, the aircraft had conventional missions, they faced defenses. You know, ICBM is almost 99% on alert. A bomber weapon is lucky if it's 30%.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

Even if you're alerted. And it could be a lot lower. Yet, we wanted to encourage, for a number of reasons, commitment to allies, but also the role of the bombers in the lower levels of escalation for deterrence, where they're seen as much more effective at preventing the start of the escalation than our ballistic missiles. So we wanted to protect the bombers. And so, I suggested to my Soviet counterpart, Alexei Obukov at the time, or Viktor Karpov also, that what we do is look at some kind of discount for bombers, a discount rule. And what I suggested was that we count a bomber, not only as a delivery system under the 1600 delivery system limit, but that we count each bomber as a warhead under the warhead limit.

So there would be an attribution rule. And they didn't like that. And then, I explained to them, I said, "You know if you want to count every weapon on a bomber, A, we're going to have to have another sublimit. But B, we're going to have to have the most intrusive inspection you've ever imagined to have any confidence in that." We can count bombers, but counting weapons on bombers when they move around so much. I use their expression, "We're going to have to frisk your mothers." And ironically, they came back and agreed, and said, "Okay, we'll agree to a discount rule." Now, what I had proposed is every bomber count as one no matter how it's armed. What was agreed for START I was, if it had no air launch cruise missiles, it counted as one. But if it had air launch cruise missiles, there would be an attribution number. That would be agreed.

And we know they could carry more or less, and that it might be kind of like an average, but it would be an agreed number to attribute to the bomber. Ironically, and partly at Russian insistence, the original discount rule that I had proposed for START I that we did not get became the discount rule in New START, and was agreed to. And I think that was one of the great achievements of New START. So the discount rule was a mechanism to help protect the diversity of the Triad, so we could deter escalation at all levels. Okay. Now, well, people say to you, "Okay, but you were heavily involved in START II." I was the guy that insisted that when the Soviets gave us two options, that we take the option that banned MIRV to ICBMs. And people said, "Well, but you did not have a discount rule in START II."

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

Yeah, but you got to understand the mechanism. And people said, "Oh, you mean because START II is embedded in START I." I said, "That's secondary." Look at how it worked. What did we get? The most important number in START II is not in START II, it's in START I, and it was not an important number to us in START I. And that was the 1600 delivery vehicle number. Why? Well, because under START II, we had a limit. I think, what was it? 1750 on SLBMs. We had a ban on MIRVed ICBMs. So in essence, to meet the ceiling of START II, you had to have bombers, because you could not have enough ballistic missiles to get there. So it was just a different way of protecting the diversity of the Triad and encouraging that at least a part of the force be the slow flyers. So my point is that you use different tools in different contexts for different reasons.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

But this issue of the bomber, how you deal with them and how you count them, goes to the whole holy grail of nuclear arms control, which is still unobtainable and vastly misunderstood. And that is we say what we want to do is deal with nuclear weapons, and by that we mean usually warheads and bombs. But wait, in SALT I, nobody counted those. You counted holes in the ground and bases and submarines and missile tubes. In SALT II, you counted launchers. In START I, you counted missiles, but you attributed to each missile a number, but you didn't actually count the number. Now in New START, you had kind of a sampling approach, which says, "We declare that we've got X number deployed. And within certain limits, you're allowed to come look and see whether we're lying to you with respect to a specific place. If you don't catch us lying, you can assume that we weren't lying about the rest as well."

In no case have we ever negotiated a treaty in which we actually handle the warheads. Now, let me give you a feel for the domestic political and the broader context of that issue. When Frank Carlucci asked me to come back from Geneva where I was the START negotiator to become the assistant secretary, one of the things he wanted me to do was help deal with INF and selling of INF. And we had a challenge right away. And I remember I think it was all within a few days, I had to go see two US senators. One was Jesse Helms, a hawk on the right, and the other was a name you may recognize, Joe Biden. They had the identical position. INF is flawed because you're not actually destroying warheads. Well, we had heard all of this before. And we had done something that was largely symbolic, but here was the problem.

The Soviets had hot production lines. And the way their weapons work was they were constantly replacing them. They just kept rebuilding. They always had new ones coming, and they would mine the old ones, and they keep it going. We designed our weapons to last for, we thought 20 years, we were keeping them 30, 40 years. You were giving up a lot. And at that time, we were not producing and we were in a very difficult situation in terms of our infrastructure. We did not want to destroy our warheads. So what we did is, in the case of the INF missiles, the Pershings and the ground launch cruise missiles, the Pershing ballistic missile. We cut up the nose cones. We did that primarily to satisfy this thing of you're not taking care of the warheads. So we took care of the nose cone, but we never actually did the warheads.

There's a reason. I mentioned one reason. But let me give you a reason, if you ever actually get down to low numbers. And that is, what is a warhead? What is a latent capability for a warhead? How do you know how many warheads are where? How do you find warheads? They're very small. And it's much worse than people understand. So everybody said, "Well, I'm just going to ban them or I'm going to limit them to a few hundred or this." The uncertainty if you do that, absent an incredibly intrusive verification regime with the society you really trust. You're probably not going to have a lot of confidence in that agreement because warheads are too hard. Anyway, that's it for problem for the future.

Amy Nelson:

Terrific. Thank you. That was wonderful. Ultimately, how did the final START I treaty reflect your original vision? Were there compromises that were particularly notable that either broadened, narrowed, or otherwise altered the scope of the negotiations?

Ron Lehman:

Well, when we approached it, we were looking more at nested sublimits rather than discount rules, and we did do the discount rules.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

I think there were quite a number of people who believed that many of the things we wanted to accomplish were just too demanding in terms of reductions and in terms of verification. But in fact, in a changed political environment, the doors opened. And when those were seen as vehicles for solving problems rather than rhetoric for influencing publics and politicians, they suddenly went from being hyper idealistic to practical and realistic, and that was the key to success.

Amy Nelson:

Would you agree with the current, I would say, reigning assessment that the climate isn't right for these kinds of arms control negotiations today?

Ron Lehman:

Yes and no. I mean, if you're looking for a successful outcome, it isn't going to be easy, but let me be a contrarian a little bit. Arms control isn't something you do when you finally decided you're friends. It is in play always, not only when you're cooperative and competitive, but when you have confrontation and even conflict.

And if you look at all of the treaties from the golden age of arms control, whether they're the conventional treaties, CFE, OSCE, CWC. I was heavily involved in the Chemical Weapons Convention. If you look at all of them, all of them were shaped, not after we became good buddies, but back when we were actually competing, and in conflict, and in confrontation.

Amy Nelson:

Do you think we're ripe for another wave?

Ron Lehman:

That's when you shape them. And that's when, to some degree, you need to be most clear about what's in your interest.

Amy Nelson:

Do you think we're ripe for another wave of those kinds of agreements?

Ron Lehman:

Another wave? I don't know. I mean, here's your challenge. If you're going to deal with warheads, you've already got a more demanding challenge. If you are going to... You know, right away, we had so much verification that you got some verification fatigue. And even in the U.S. people were saying, "Do I got to have all these inspections and spend all this money doing all this stuff? I trust me. Why do I have to inspect me?" You know?

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

This sort of stuff. In the future, you now are dealing with regimes that are absolutely afraid of openness and transparency and don't want any mechanisms for accountability. And unfortunately, one of the responses of some of the community is to say, "Well, then we'll just have to do the easier thing, which is declare norms." But these people are violating norms purposefully.

Amy Nelson:

The Russians.

Ron Lehman:

I mean, it's not for nothing that they're using banned chemical weapons agents to assassinate domestic opponents in other people's countries, and it's not just the Russians.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

This is not an environment in which you want to put your trust in vaporware. I remember once going to a conference in Pakistan, and the NGO that was sponsoring the conference wanted to have it be all about the importance of No First Use. And it was hilarious because the Pakistanis doesn't support No First Use, but they were our hosts, so nobody wanted to criticize the Pakistanis. But the Pakistanis said that they couldn't believe in No First Use, because they didn't believe the Indian who had a No First Use pledge.

And the Chinese were there and the Indians said, "But we don't believe the Chinese because we've heard Chinese diplomats tell us that even though that China says it has an absolute No First Use policy, they say, 'But of course if our territory were attacked, that wouldn't apply.'" And of course, we have disputed territory with China, and Taiwan is disputed territory. So in essence, theirNo First Use means nothing.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

So it was agreed, let's beat up on the U.S. because they don't have a No First Use policy. Well, actually that's not true. We and the other P5 have given No First Use assurances to all of the members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that are in good standing. So almost every country in the world has a No First Use pledge from the United States. Well, who doesn't? Well, the non-members. So Israel is a non-member, so they don't get a No First Use pledge. The British and French don't get a No First Use pledge from us because they're a nuclear weapon states. They're also allies. Russia no longer has a No First Use pledge. And as we learned from the documents from the Warsaw Pact, they never really implemented it. They just said it.

So the only country that really is out there that has a No First Use pledge is China. And I've told you what others think the Chinese No First Use Pledge is worth. But let me go one step further. Russia has a No First Use pledge, and yet what is it doing in the context of Ukraine? It's constantly threatening to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapons state. A non-nuclear weapons state that used to be part of the same country for a while that gave up its own nuclear weapons in exchange for a security pledge from the Russians and others. And now, they're threatening them. And they say, "On the one hand, we used to have a No First use pledge. We've given it up. And now, we're threatening..." So is that the basis for future arms control? I don't think so.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

I mean, I'm not arguing to change our commitments under the NPT. I'm just simply saying that in the real world of the real players, if you want arms control, you need to have substance.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

And If you're going to have substance, you need to start thinking about how do you have confidence in behavior? And that inevitably leads you to verification, but it also leads you to verification that is appropriate to the potential adversary you're worried about. So I used to argue when we got the North-South Denuclearization Agreement with North Korea that that was an NPT plus because we told the North Koreans, "You can inspect our bases in South Korea, you just have to go through the South Korean government." They didn't want to do that. They, of course, especially when we caught them cheating, their argument was, "You can go to nuclear or declared nuclear facilities to the IAEA, but not to any other place." But of course, where they were hiding the material that they had illicitly gotten was at another place.

Amy Nelson:

Great, thank you. I want to move on to the CFE Treaty-

Ron Lehman:

Sure.

Amy Nelson:

... which was signed in 1990 and entered into force in 1992. It established parity of course and reduced conventional forces in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. And it was really a series of agreements, right? That provided on-site inspections, data exchanges. You were the director of ACDA at the time. What were the key concerns that drove the U.S. to the negotiation table for CFE?

Ron Lehman:

Well, you have to go back a little further to MBFR, the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks. One of the big concerns was that, in the nuclear age, a major conventional war could become nuclear, and it could become nuclear very early. And so, given that what you had in Helsinki was an effort to try to sort of normalize and stabilize Europe, it worked in a strange way, because the Soviet goal was to legitimize their occupation of Eastern Europe.

And the consequence of Helsinki was that the destruction of the Soviet Union, because of the openness and the political change. But prior to that, we were trying to basically reduce the ground-force threat. And the problem with MBFR was that it was all about personnel. But what anybody should understand is that the number of troops isn't the measure of merit.

Amy Nelson:

What is?

Ron Lehman:

You have to deal with what technology and weapons do they have? What are their doctrines? Where are they physically deployed? How do you deal with all of those issues? And so, what happened is as we began to make progress in arms control and political change in the Soviet Union, they came to grips with the age of stagnation. They were interested in reducing the size of forces and reducing costs and expenditures, and we were. And we used that to try to reduce the ground-force threats. A lot of other issues became involved because of the rapid pace of political change. So remember, when CFE was being negotiated, what we were trying to do was get a handle on, not only personnel, but weapons.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

And the big difference between CFE and MBFR was, not only weapons, but the incredible variety of weapons. And it got to be very complex. So when I was assistant secretary with Carlucci, Frank and I went to visit the Soviet Defense Minister, and we visited military bases. And at one of them, they had a static display of armored vehicles. And I remember that I turned to Frank at one point, because we were having definitional issues of what's a tank? What's artillery? What's an armored personnel carrier? How do you differentiate those? And here were all of these vehicles lined up.

And it was a perfect chance for me to say to Frank, "Frank, if I say a tank is an armored vehicle with a big gun on it, which one of these is the tank?" Because there were self-propelled howitzers, there were self-propelled mortars, there were armored personnel carriers, they're big, have guns. Some had turrets, but some didn't have turrets. But some of those that didn't have turrets were more like a tank, even though tanks typically are thought of as having turrets. Some were tracked vehicles, some were wheeled vehicles, but with the same gun on them. And he said, "I get your point."

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

And I remember that one of the military officers with us said, "Ah, but you know a howitzer, it's an indirect fire weapon. It shoots up like that. A tank shoots flat."

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

So I said, "Come with me." And we walked over to this Soviet army sergeant standing in front of his self-propelled howitzer, and I asked him, "How low can you lower this gun and fire for effect?" And he said something like minus seven degrees. Now, everybody in the military, I was in the army, you know that for self-protection, howitzers lower their guns and fire just like a tank.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

Anyway, it was very complex.

Amy Nelson:

So difficult to make this distinction.

Ron Lehman:

We're dealing with helicopters, with aircraft, many, many things. That was important. But the other thing you mentioned was the geography. It's concentrations that also matter. And so when we first began, it was, "Okay, how do we avoid concentrations forward, so that we avoid somebody gaining enough numerical advantage to overcome the defense in a NATO Warsaw Pact scenario?" By the time we finished in CFE, the Warsaw Pact was falling apart, and we had to renegotiate everything. And now, you ran into this incredible environment in which the republics of the former Soviet Union were more worried about each other or other members of the former Soviet Union than they were the West. And then, you got into all kinds of issues, when I was director of ACDA.

And it is not just in the East. The West had its own problems. So I'll give you an example. We had to negotiate the map of the zones, but we had a problem with the Turks, because the Turks were worried about, believe it or not, Syria. And so, they had a zone that they did not want included because it was about Syria, not about the Soviet Union. And we wanted to put out a map on an ACDA brochure that would show the zones. And they came to me, and of course they had all of this complex language on there trying to figure out how do you explain this little zone down in Turkey? I said, "You guys don't get it. That's where you put our logo." We just cover it up, because it hadn't been resolved yet. And you wanted to make it, have a simple map that gives the concept, but you didn't want to have it just be all about one issue we hadn't yet resolved.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

So we just put the logo over it.

Amy Nelson:

In the end, the treaty came together rather quickly, didn't it?

Ron Lehman:

It did. But remember, the world was changing at an incredibly rapid way, and CFE is a good example. For a long time, we kept the manpower issue in. And what we were doing, and it was a Western and U.S. position, was to insist on equal U.S. and Soviet manpower subceilings in the area of Germany, which was not yet united. When it became clear that the Soviet Union was going to leave Germany, we didn't want to have a treaty that required that us to be equal to them in the region. We had to drop all of that. So change happened, and it happened very fast. And remember, one of the arms control agreement nobody ever looks at is the Two Plus Four Agreement on the unification of Germany.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

I mean, arms control was many things. Remember the hotline upgrade, that was the first time I was actually formerly a member of a delegation was the hotline upgrade. And that was when we were deploying the INF missiles. So we wanted to use it for what eventually became the Nuclear Risk Reduction Center, but for confidence building. They wouldn't talk about that. They would only let us talk to the communications ministry, and only about the technical details. They'd let us

say what we wanted, but they weren't going to respond. Why? Because they didn't want any idea that there was tension reduction.

Why? Well, because their whole campaign against the INF deployments was to say, "We're on the verge of war. Any second now hair trigger, we're all going to blow up if you deploy those INF missiles." So the idea that we would be negotiating on confidence building was something that they did not want to deal with. To illustrate that, just before we deployed the INF missiles, I was in Moscow meeting with Sasha Bessmertnykh, who later became Deputy Foreign Minister, but was then, I guess, the head of the U.S. desk in the foreign ministry.

And there were a number of diplomats and others standing around when he and I were having a conversation, and it got reported in Strobe Talbott's book, *Deadly Gambits*, and elsewhere that Bessmertnykh told me that the Soviets could agree to some cruise missiles in Great Britain. He did say that. What everybody missed was the context of what he said. What he really said was, "Ron, we will never, ever, ever acquiesce in the deployment of the INF missiles. But once the NATO missiles are deployed, who knows?" Maybe then we could agree to something perhaps a few cruise missiles in Great Britain.

Amy Nelson:

Interesting. With the CFE Treaty now effectively suspended, what legacy do you think it leaves behind? Are there pieces of the original framework worth reviving or reimagining today? What should be the fate of arms control architecture in Europe?

Ron Lehman:

Well, a lot will depend on what happens in Russia. Because right now, Russia has problems with all of its neighbors. I mean, the friendliest country to Russia right now in the world is probably North Korea. And the North Koreans don't trust the Russians and vice versa, but that's their closest ally. China is, on the one hand, helping Russia very much as part of the effort to create an alternative to the free world order that had emerged at the end of the Cold War.

But when I was spending a lot of time in Moscow in the '90s, it was very typical for the Russians to say, "You know, the Europeans think we're a bunch of cowboys. But they think you're a bunch of cowboys too. Why don't Russia and the United States get together and protect each other against China?" Well, we'll see. But right now, even Russia's former allies are not supporting Russia on Ukraine because they think they could be next. And neighbors that had been Finlandized are in NATO. The Swedes are in NATO. Parts of Yugoslavia are in NATO.

Amy Nelson:

Is there a future treaty to be had?

Ron Lehman:

I mean, yes, someday there is, but I don't know that it will look like CFE. But what I know is that it isn't going to happen in any effective way until you get political change. And when it happens, it is going to want to have ways to build trust that will be like verification, but they will involve much more openness, transparency, and engagement.

Amy Nelson:

That's terrific, Ron. Thank you. Before we wrap up, I have a couple of concluding questions. But I want to come back to this idea of this inextricable relationship between deterrence and arms control and put it into today's strategic context. Is there anything you want to add, any advice that

you have, or any perspective you can offer on this current moment in time and advice for the future?

Ron Lehman:

Yeah. I mean, there are many objectives that we attribute to arms control. I wrote a chapter in a law case book on arms control. And I listed I think some twenty-odd objectives that people say, "This is why we want to negotiate arms control." But fundamentally, it's about security and reducing risk as an adjunct to your diplomatic foreign policy and your defense policy. And so, they're tightly integrated. And in a globalized world, you have to understand that they're globalized. So for example, one of the problems of Reykjavik was that in an effort to get things going on INF, it was agreed that we would drop the Global Zero approach, and that the Soviets could keep SS-20s east of the Urals, and we would pull out of Europe.

People keep invoking this in the context of things like theater nuclear weapons. They could be east of the Urals, and we would pull back out of Europe. This is a loser. But one of the reasons it's a loser is that, go back to the Reykjavik Agreement. Immediately in East Asia, there was outrage that they were now second-class citizens, that the nuclear samurai came out of the woodwork in Japan, joined with the Hiroshima movement to say, "We won't get disarmament until we get nuclear weapons." There was advocacy for proliferation. All because we were going to let there be SS-20s. Even the Soviets were shocked by the negative reaction to this proposal. But not only that, back in Western Europe, people realized SS-20's mobile. It moves easily back west of the Urals. This is a losing proposal.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

Okay. That galvanized people to recognize that you've got to think about other people's interests too. It's not just the negotiating parties. And we're in a much more interactive, interrelated world, and it gets complex. Let me give you an example. I was sent to the Middle East in '92, partly because we were finishing up the Chemical Weapons Convention when we were going to try to get various parties to sign up to CWC, and I met with Yitzhak Rabin in Israel. And he had formerly been the defense minister, and now was the prime minister. And Rabin said to me, "You know, you used to be in the Pentagon. Now, you're doing this arms control. Why should I be doing this?" And I made the argument that arms control and deterrence and defense are interrelated.

And I didn't make much progress, but I said to him, Look, you need to understand something. If you don't come up with proposals that serve your interests, you can be sure somebody's going to come up with some that don't." He didn't seem to be very much interested. He repeated the standard Israeli position, which is, "We are not prepared to join in any agreement with any country that doesn't recognize our right to exist." So no multilateral, we want to negotiate directly. And we were then doing the Arms Control and Regional Security, the so-called ACRS workshops. And the Israelis said they didn't want to participate with that name. They thought it should be regional security first, then arms control. So these were the kind of arguments.

But at one point I said to Rabin, "Look, if you don't sign the CWC, you don't get to go to the PREPCOM. And your people are telling us they're all worried about the intrusive inspection aspect. Well, if you want to be a player in that, you have to sign the treaty." I came back and reported that I had made no progress. And the Israelis were silent on the issue. So the Arab League got together and held a meeting and said, "Because Israel had not committed to sign the CWC, the members of the Arab League would not sign the CWC." Few days later, Israel

announces they're going to sign the CWC. And when I saw Shimon Peres in Paris in January of '93 when we signed the CWC, he told me that one of the reasons they were signing was they wanted to participate in the PREPCOM, which they did. And guess what? They've never ratified the CWC.

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Ron Lehman:

Why? You ask them, and they'll say, "Because we're not going to join an agreement with countries that don't recognize our right to exist."

Amy Nelson:

But they acknowledge it all hangs together systemically.

Ron Lehman:

So you see, how many different factors are playing?

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Ron Lehman:

You got to take deterrence, defense, diplomacy, development, democracy. They all are interrelated. Now, one of the things that was a big issue often in the Cold War negotiations was linkage. We won't do this if you don't do that. And I've heard many people say that the great success in our arms control in the golden age was we got things de-linked, and there's some truth to that. I was sent to meet with Ceausescu a few days before he was going to host Gorbachev to get him to tell Gorbachev that he should de-link START I from defense and space negotiations. De-linkage is important, but analytically, the real issue goes back to what I said about knowledge and information and analysis. Everything is related to everything, but some things are more related than others. And typically what you're trying to do is figure out a good balanced package that works for both sides.

Amy Nelson:

Terrific. One final question. Any further advice to future arms control negotiators you'd like to share?

Ron Lehman:

Yeah. There are enduring principles, and it's important to understand those. But the real question is applying them in a world of rapid political change and rapid technological change, and you've got to understand both. If you don't understand both, you're going to make big mistakes.

Amy Nelson:

Terrific. Ambassador, Lehman, thank you so much.

Ron Lehman:

And thank you.